DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 357 405 CS 508 182

AUTHOR Ma, Ringo
TITLE Taoist Thinking Pattern as Reflected in Communication.
PUB DATE 14 Feb 93
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western States Communication Association (64th, Albuquerque, NM, February 12-16, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Chinese; *Cognitive Development; *Cognitive Style; *Communication (Thought Transfer); Cultural Context; Discourse Analysis; Higher Education; Idioms; *Taoism
IDENTIFIERS Aristotle; Communication Behavior

ABSTRACT

Students' exposure to the Taoist thinking pattern should have a significant meaning in their cognitive development and life enrichment. The thinking pattern reflected in Taoist discourse is in sharp contrast to what is demonstrated in Aristotelian rhetoric. The circular thinking pattern usually resided in a paradoxical and/or relativistic statements and is a surrogate for the Taoist notion of infinity. It permeates into Chinese communication and can be found in many commonly used Chinese idioms. However, this thinking pattern is not exclusively Chinese. Similar patterns can be identified in North America as well, though they may not represent the mainstream pattern. Taoist thinking pattern is also consistent with the way different variables are found to be associated in communication studies. (Contains 22 references.) (Author/RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED357405

Taoist Thinking Pattern As Reflected in Communication

Ringo Ma
State University of New York
College at Fredonia
Department of Communication
Fredonia, NY 14063

Paper presented at the 1993 convention of the
Western States Communication Association
Albuquerque, NM
February 14, 1993

CS508182

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Ringo Ma
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Abstract:

Taoist Thinking Pattern As Reflected in Communication

The thinking pattern reflected in Taoist discourse is in sharp contrast to what is demonstrated in Aristotelian rhetoric. The circular thinking pattern usually resided in a paradoxical and/or relativistic statements is a surrogate for the Taoist notion of infinity. It permeates into Chinese communication and can be found in many commonly used Chinese idioms. However, this thinking pattern is not exclusively Chinese. Similar patterns can be identified in North America as well, though they may not represent the mainstream pattern. Taoist thinking pattern is also consistent with the way different variables are found to be associated in communication studies.

Key Words: Taoism, Taoist Thinking Pattern, Circular Thinking Pattern, Taoist Paradox, Taoist Relativity, Chinese Culture, Chinese Communication.

Taoist Thinking Pattern As Reflected in Communication

He [or She] who acts, harms; he [or she] who grabs, lets slip.

Therefore the Sage does not act, and so does not harm;
Does not grab, and so does not let slip.
Whereas the people of the world, at their tasks,
Constantly spoil things when within an ace of completing them.

-Tao Te Ching[1], Chapter 64

Not long ago I began to notice that the harder I tried to achieve a particular type of relationship or to create a particular impression, the more these goals eluded me.

-Campbell (1986, p. 262)

As one of the three mainstream Chinese philosophies in China, Taoism has attracted a great deal of attention and curiosity in the West. North American communication scholars are no exceptions. They have studied the influence of Taoism on the communication pattern in China for several decades (e.g., Be[illegible]er, 1986; Oliver, 1961; Reynolds, 1969). Taoist discourse is dissimilar to the Aristotelian approach. Aristotelian rhetoric underscores the idea of deliberate, analytic, and goal-oriented thought and action. What lies at the heart of Taoist thought is, however, wu-wei.[2] Wu-wei can be interpreted literally as "nonaction or, more importantly, as the kind of unpremeditated, nondeliberative, noncalculating, nonpurposive action (or, more accurately, behavior) . . ." (Schwartz, 1985, p. 188). According to Creel (1970), wu-wei denotes both "a particular complex of ideas

concerning governmental administration" and "a desire to withdraw from and take no part in the struggle of human affairs" (p. 78). Welch (1957) translates the Taoist "doctrine of inaction" into the following relational paradoxes:

> In human relations force defeats itself. Every action produces a reaction, every challenge a response. (p. 20)

In addition, according to Waley (1965), wu-wei is the first step to Tao:

> To be in harmony with, not in rebellion against the fundamental laws of the universe is the first step, then, on the way to Tao. For Tao is itself the always-so, the fixed, the unconditioned, that which "is of itself" and for no cause "so." (Waley, 1965, p. 55)

From the communication perspectives which emphasize messages production and speaking skills Taoism seems to be counter-communicative, because Taoism emphasizes spontaneous functioning and discourages proactiveness. However, as Barnlund (1990) notes, the "message-centered philosophy of communication" and "speaker-centered philosophy of communication" should be replaced by the "meaning-centered philosophy of communication." Meanings are "not transmitted, nor transferable," but are "generated from within" (p. 39). Communication is best described as "the process of creating a meaning" (p. 39). From the meaning-creating point of view, Taoism plays an important role in Chinese communication. For

many centuries Chinese people have shared with one another significant meanings of life associated with Taoist ideas. These shared meanings constitute a major part of their communication experience.

Most Chinese are indoctrinated by both Confucianism and Taoism. A major difference between the two is, according to D. T. Suzuki (in Legge, 1959), that "The Confucian teaching is thoroughly social and humanistic while the Taoist is transcendental, viewing things from a higher level of thought" (p. 10). The dual perspective serves to help many people cope with different life encounters. For example, the Confucian doctrines are carefully observed when one is successful in politics or business, while Taoist ideas can serve to reduce stress and transcend desires when he or she is not doing well. A Chinese historian of the second century, Szu-ma Chien, was reported to make the following remarks regarding Taoist thought:

> The Taoist school of thought enables a person to concentrate his [or her] mind on a few things, to live without worry, and to enjoy whatever is around him [or her]. . . . (Wang, 1968, p. 73)

Most Chinese may not have an in-depth understanding of Taoism, but they are quite familiar with many Taoist sayings. The most famous Taoist work, the Tao Te Ching, are often quoted to interpret their life experiences. Their communication is assumed to be influenced by Taoist thinking

pattern to a significant extent. Traditionally, the Tao Te Ching is also considered to be the starting point for any discussion of Taoism (Girardot, 1983, p. 47). The first purpose of this paper is, therefore, to identify the Taoist thinking pattern as revealed in the Tao Te Ching.

Although efforts have been made to understand Taoism from the Chinese perspective, the essence of Taoism is sometimes misrepresented in the West. For example, Becker (1986) states

> The philosophy of Taoism may appear attractive to people tired of competition, and to those resigned in the face of authoritarian administrations. But Taoism provides no solutions to social problems, and is thoroughgoing in its rejection of both speech and communication. (p. 88)

In these statements, Taoism is viewed from the Aristotelian orthodoxy in the West. The role Taoism plays in reducing stress and promoting harmony for many Chinese is unrecognized. Taoist transcendental meaning shared by many Chinese is not acknowledged either.

Oliver (1971) applies the traditional Western concepts of communication in analyzing the Taoist philosophy. In response to Oliver's approach, Chang (1991) states that "it is questionable that, given the Taoist view on advising people to follow the path of nature (Tao) while discarding human desire, issues of 'effective speaking' and 'skills of communication' should be relevant at all" (p. 2).

Is Taoism really too non-Western for it to be related in the West? The answer seems to be "no." Human beings share a lot of experience. They all try to find new ways to define their existence every now and then. Furthermore, the cultural exchange between China and the West has taken place for several centuries. The Taoist thinking pattern is likely to be reflected in the West to some extent. The second purpose of this paper is, therefore, to identify Taoist thinking or similar ones in North America.

The Taoist thinking pattern as exhibited in Chinese communication is primarily circular in nature. D. T. Suzuki (in Legge, 1959) describes the Taoist concept of circularity as follows:

> The starting point is the terminating point; in other words, the line starts nowhere and ends nowhere. When we say it starts here this limits and makes the line finite. (p. 18)

The circular thinking pattern reflects the notion of infinity, as opposed to a finite, linear one. Wang (1968) reports that "Tao is beginningless and endless," and equates Tao with "the infinite way of universe" (pp. 61-62). He also notes that in the philosophic pattern of Taoism, human beings should conform to their true natures in order to harmonize with the principles of Tao (pp. 61-62).

To apply the Hall's concept of high-context cultures (HCC) versus low-context cultures (LCC) (1976) to situations

involving conflicts, Ting-Toomey (1985) proposed that the members of HCC (including the Chinese culture) are more likely to view the world in "synthetic, spiral logic terms," while LCC members are more likely to view it in "analytic, linear logic terms" (p. 78). Here the term "spiral logic" is used to substitute the circular thinking pattern. Yum (1988) also maintains that in East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) cultures, communication is perceived as an on-going process of infinite interpretation.

The concept of circularity is usually resided in a paradoxical and/or relativistic statement. The Taoists are, as Creel (1970) stated, "well known to be fond of paradoxes" (p. 37). According to Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (1983), a "paradox" refers to "a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true" (p. 853). As Schwartz (1985) has pointed out, "[in the Tao Te Ching] we find the constant paradoxical effort to speak about the unspeakable" (p. 198). "Relativity" is, on the other hand, irreconcilable with absoluteness or extremity. As recorded in Chapter 15 of the Tao Te Ching, "Those who posses this Tao do not try to fill themselves to the brim . . ." In Chapter 29, it is stated that "the Sage discards the absolute, the all-inclusive, the extreme . . ." Waley (1965) notes that "The first great principle of Taoism is the relativity of all attributes" (p. 51). Bodde (1953), in comparing the position toward the origin of evil among

different philosophic schools in China, also reports that "The Taoist . . . never tire of pointing out that what men call right and wrong, good and evil, are purely relative concepts, without validity from the standpoint of the universal Tao" (p. 40).

Paradoxical and relativistic expressions, which are usually used to demonstrate circularity, or the concept of infinity, can be identified in many places in the Tao Te Ching. The two are often closely related and not mutually exclusive. Most relativistic statements are contrary to our common sense, and thus paradoxical. For example, both relativity and paradoxicality can be found in the following text:

> It is because every one under Heaven recognizes beauty as beauty, that the idea of ugliness exists.
> And equally if every one recognized virtue as virtue, this would merely create fresh conceptions of wickedness.
> For truly Being and Not-being grow out of one another;
> Difficult and easy complete one another.
> Long and short test one another;
> High and low determine one another. . . . (Chapter 2)

Relatively speaking, nothing is in itself being or not-being; and paradoxically, we create a new problem once we try to solve one. Through relativity and paradoxicality, the oneness of starting and terminating points is implied in these lines. Circularity is thus suggested. The following is

another passage from the Tao Te Ching, which is both relativistic and paradoxical:

As the heavy must be the foundation of the light,
So quietness is lord and master of activity.
Truly, "Chun-tzu [a man of consequence] though he travels all day
Will not let himself be separated from his baggage-wagon,
However magnificent the view, he sits quiet and dispassionate." (Chapter 26)

The relativistic and paradoxical view revealed here is that being quiet is an important component of activity, just as the light can not be separated from its heavy foundation. However, not all paradoxical statements are relativistic. The following paradox, for example, is not based on relativity:

Those who know do not speak;
Those who speak do not know. (Chapter 56)

In this statement, a seemingly untrue statement is used to uncover a profound truth. That is, the real understanding of Tao comes from a merger of mind and Tao. Only actionless activity and wordless teaching reflect a genuine internalization of Tao. The statement also implies that those who have a thorough understanding of Tao, just like those who know nothing about it, do not preach. In other words, the concept of circularity is suggested. The following is not relativistic either; it is, however, paradoxical:

Tao never does;

Yet through it all things are done.
If the barons and kings would but possess themselves of it,
The ten thousand creatures would at once be transformed.
And if having been transformed they should desire to act,
We must restrain them by the blankness of the Unnamed [or literally, "the uncarven-wood-quality"].
The blankness of the Unnamed
Brings dispassion;
To be dispassionate is to be still.
And so [if the Sage is "still"], of itself, the whole empire will be at rest. (Chapter 37)

Here, again, the action and actionless become one, which is contrary to our common sense and nevertheless true from the Taoist perspective.

The Taoist thinking pattern is widely reflected in the Chinese culture today as well as many centuries ago. One way to assess how their life is influenced by the pattern is to examine some of the idioms used by Chinese. Chinese idioms are an important part of the Chinese culture. First, they are used extensively in their daily conversation as well as formal writing. Second, many of these idioms can be traced back to a traditional thought or historic event. Furthermore, most Chinese idioms are composed of four Chinese characters, so it is relatively easy for ordinary people to recollect and use

them. To many Chinese these idioms apparently symbolize a bridge between their culture and communication.

The thinking pattern reflected in the Tao Te Ching are represented in many Chinese idioms that are still widely used today. The Taoist "wu-wei" or "spontaneous functioning" theme, for instance, is manifested in numerous idioms. Chuan tao chiao tou tzu jan chih (船到橋頭自然直) literally means "the boat will surely move straight forward when it reaches a [narrow] bridge under-pass," and connotes that "it will take care of itself when the time comes." Yu kai mi chang (欲蓋彌彰), a paradox, refers to "try to conceal one's fault only to make it all the more conspicuous."

The circular thinking pattern is reflected in many Chinese idioms as well. They are usually paradoxical and relativistic. For example, Ta chih jo yu (大智若愚) denotes that "the wise person looks like a fool." Wu chi pi fan (物極必反) indicates that "as soon as a thing reaches its extremity, it reverses its course." Chiung tse ssu pien (窮則思變) can be translated into "poverty gives rise to a desire for change [so poverty can generate more opportunity than wealth does]." Cheng tse wei wang, pai tse wei kou (成則為王,敗則為寇), refers to the following phenomenon in human history: "A victor, you are king; a failure, you are a bandit."

The Taoist thinking pattern is obviously out of accordance with the Aristotelian approach to human

communication. However, it is not totally unfamiliar to North Americans. Some Western old sayings, for instance, are paradoxes suggesting circularity and/or spontaneous functioning, though they are not used in modern speech as frequently as are Chinese idioms. The saying, "more haste, less speed," implies that being faster is getting closer to being slower. The statement, "sorrow follows pleasure," nevertheless, denotes the closeness between sorrow and pleasure.

The "spontaneous functioning" theme is strongly suggested, if not explicitly prescribed, by many humanistic scholars. The American Association of Humanistic Psychology (1962) officially announces its concern with spontaneity, naturalness, and transcendental experience among other topics (p. 2). Rogers (1970) discloses the following view of interpersonal communication:

> In my relationships with persons I have found that it does not help, in the long run, to act as though I were something that I am not." (p. 16)

In this statement the goal-oriented approach to communication is discarded in favor of a "spontaneous functioning" alternative. "The paradox of surrender" proposed by Campbell (1986) bears a resemblance to Taoist teaching as well:

> Not long ago I began to notice that the harder I tried to achieve a particular type of relationship or to create a

particular impression, the more these goals eluded me. (p. 266)

Supported by research findings, the circular thinking pattern is no longer perceived as being perversive in North America. Relationships between many variables in communication studies have been found to be non-linear. For example, a curvilinear relationship is identified between liking and self-disclosure (Cozby, 1972) and between group cohesiveness and productivity (Fisher & Ellis, 1990, p. 35). In other words, both too little and too much self-disclosure create low level of liking, and that both low- and high-level of group cohesiveness is associated with low productivity. These findings seem to endorse the notion that as soon as a thing reaches its extremity, it reverses its course. It has also echoed the Taoist idea that the starting point is the terminating point.

From what has been previously discussed it is clear that the circular thinking pattern <u>can</u> be identified in North America, though most people are not aware of its philosophical implications. While Chinese are less likely to believe that the linear pattern reflects a true reality than do North Americans, many North Americans will probably not take a statement reflecting the circular thinking pattern as seriously as do many Chinese. On the other hand, a North American can also be fascinated by the circular pattern

because he or she feels that the pattern is atypical of what has been frequently experienced and yet still identifiable.

In summary, the thinking pattern reflected in Taoist discourse is in sharp contrast to what is demonstrated in Aristotelian rhetoric. The circular thinking pattern identified in the Tao Te Ching is a surrogate for the Taoist notion of infinity. It is usually exhibited in a paradoxical and/or relativistic statement, so the unspeakable becomes perceivable and communicative. The circular thinking pattern still permeates into Chinese communication today. A good reflection of this pattern is found in many commonly used Chinese idioms. However, it should not be suggested that this thinking pattern is exclusively Chinese. The similar ideas can be identified in North American literature as well, though they may not represent the mainstream pattern. In addition, as being unfolded in research findings, the Taoist thinking pattern is found to be consistent with the way different variables are associated in communication studies.

This report has at least two implications for communication studies in North America. First, a major goal of the higher education in a multicultural society is to encourage students to think pluralistically. In order to fulfill this goal, the Aristotelian perspective as the only approach covered in many critical thinking courses seems to be inadequate in preparing students for an increasingly interdependent global community. Alternative perspectives

need to be considered as well. Taoist thinking pattern, as shown in this study, represents a contrast to the Aristotelian perspective. Students' exposure to it should have a significant meaning in their cognitive development and life enrichment. Second, Chinese and North American communication may not be so different as some previous studies have underscored. Although dominant patterns tend to differ from each other there are noticeable similarities between the two cultures. Under many circumstances of intercultural communication, an understanding of the similarities between the two cultures is as important as of their differences.

Notes

[1]While the Taoist concepts introduced in this paper are based on the original Chinese version of the Tao Te Ching, the English translation included in Arthur Waley's book (1965) was adopted for quotations.

[2]The Wade-Giles system of romanization is used to transliterate special Chinese terms and idioms in this paper.

References

American Association of Humanistic Psychology. (1962). Articles of association.

Barnlund, D. C. (1990). Toward a meaning-centered philosophy of communication. In J. Stewart (Ed.), Bridges not walls (5th ed.) (pp. 37-43). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Becker, C. B. (1986). Reasons for the lack of argumentation and debate in the Far East. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 10, 75-92.

Bodde, D. (1953). Harmony and conflict in Chinese philosophy. In A. F. Wright (Ed.), Studies in Chinese thought (pp. 19-80). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Campbell, S. M. (1986). From either-or to both-and relationships. In J. Stewart (Ed.), Bridges not walls (4th ed.) (pp. 262-271). New York: Random House.

Chang, H.-C. (1991, November). A Taoist view of language and communication. Paper presented at the 1991 convention of the Speech Communication Association, Atlanta.

Cozby, P. C. (1972). Self-disclosure, reciprocity, and liking. Sociometry, 35, 151-160.

Creel, H. G. (1970). What is Taoism? and other studies in Chinese cultural history. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fisher, B. A., & Ellis, D. G. (1990). Small group decision making (3rd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Girardot, N. J. (1983). Myth and meaning in early Taoism: The theme of chaos (hun-tun). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Hall, E. T. (1976). Beyond culture. Garden City, NY: Anchor.

Legge, J. (1959). The texts of Taoism. New York: Julian Press.

Oliver, R. T. (1961). The rhetorical implications of Taoism. Quarterly Journal of Speech, 47, 27-35.

Oliver, R. T. (1971). Communication and culture in ancient India and China. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Reynolds, B. K. (1969). Lao Tzu: Persuasion through inaction and non-speaking. Today's Speech, 17, 23-25.

Rogers, C. R. (1970). On becoming a person: A therapist's view of psychotherapy. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Schwartz, B. I. (1985). The world of thought in ancient China. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Ting-Toomey, S. (1985). Toward a theory of conflict and culture. In W. B. Gudykunst, L. P. Stewart, & S. Ting-Toomey (Eds.), Communication, culture, and organizational processes (pp. 71-86). Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE.

Waley, A. (1965). The way and its power: A study of the Tao Te Ching and its place in Chinese thought. London: George Allen & Unwin.

Wang, G.-H. (1968). The Chinese mind. New York: Greenwood Press.

Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary. (1983). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster.

Welch, H. (1957). The parting of the Way: Lao Tzu and the Taoist movement. Boston: Beacon Press.

Yum, J. O. (1988). The impact of Confucianism on interpersonal relationships and communication patterns in East Asia. Communication Monographs, 55, 374-388.